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## **An Articulating Culture— Hall, Meaning and Power**

"Let's take the postmodernist argument about the collapse of the real," says Stuart Hall, early in the discussion.

Which "reality" is collapsed isn't made clear, but Hall gives, as an example, a resume of a film by David Ware, a film in which there is a plot, but "not story." The "reality" which is collapsed, therefore, might be seen as one which is defined by narrative closure, which is, by implication here, a function of plot, or at least, of realism.

Hall makes the point that "while the film has a very conventional structure, at its centre is what I would call a quite postmodernist experience," which appears to be the absence of realist sense. Which "real?" is a question which is central to Hall's debate with postmodernism, since it can be seen as a function of both "ideology" and "discourse," but he is unapologetic in his belief that, however it is defined, it must contain the traces, at least, of an unproblematic material reality. Which "centre" is more difficult to place, particularly as the film appears to have none: decentredness is the precondition of what Hall calls the "postmodernist experience."

This experience can be seen as refusal: both as part of the plot, in which the film refuses to contribute to a realist narrative by providing pertinent "facts" about the main protagonist, and as part of diegetic technique which refuses to compensate for this narrative lack. But it's not enough to suggest that this refusal is the collapse of realism which postmodernism posits and Hall acknowledges in recognising the challenges of Freud and Picasso to the "whole person" as "integrated history."

Postmodernism, he says, is the current name given to the problems raised with the "disintegration of whole experiences" which began in the 1920s. In accusing postmodernism of attempting to "gather them all under a single sign," a sign which says "this is the end of the world," Hall uses allegory: "If the Titanic is going down, how long is it going to take? If the bomb has gone off, it can't go on going off forever."

The allusion to disaster is ideologically significant, but more telling is the suggestion that the discursive suspension of closure-as-meaning in the face of the ultimate closure is ipso-facto, the suspension of meaning as anything other than metaphor.

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What the allegory makes space for, and avoids, is the postmodernist refusal to make the same "political connotations" which Hall sees as "non-necessary" in religion.

If the Titanic is going down, the question "How long is it going to take?" becomes less immediately demanding than "What shall we do in the meantime?". Meaning is less urgent than experience and pleasure—a notion that Hall rarely manages to take on board (to continue the metaphor) in his theory. For Hall, the struggle for meaning is too important, too inherently serious, to be adequately explained by a theory of pleasure.

This concept of pleasure as deceptive and culpable is too Althusserian, too unproblematic. If postmodern love and human relationships are as profoundly different as Hall suggests—although he doesn't say where the difference lies—then one question begged asks about the failure of ideological approaches to examine meanings of pleasure rather than to see it only as escape from or evasion of narrative closure and denial of consequences. Dominance exists as epistemology not simply as power.

Pleasure-as-resistance and/or refusal is no less proscribed by an articulating politics of meaning than are more "rational" regimes. This might be illustrated if we take a look at Hall's comments on Baudrillard. He assumes that Baudrillard is suggesting that there is a "shared facticity of things, things are just what we see on the surface." However, this seems to be something of a forced reading: Baudrillard (1983) writes in his article "Implosion of Meaning in the Media" that: "Information devours its own contents. It devours communication and the social for two reasons. (1) Instead of communication it exhausts itself in the act of staging the communication. Instead of producing meaning it exhausts itself in the staging of meaning." This is very different from saying that meaning simply resides on the surface. Rather Baudrillard is suggesting that the surface itself becomes the meaning because agents within this sort of discursive structure are subsumed by the notion of information as valuable in and of itself. It may well be that ideological processes, as processes of information or processes of explanation or revelation, have become precisely this sort of vehicle for meaning. In which case pleasure can be seen as part of the resistance of the masses that Baudrillard talks about and that Hall seems to have avoided in Baudrillard's work. Baudrillard (1983) suggests that this resistance is "equivalent to sending back to the system its own logic by doubling it to reflecting like a mirror meaning without absorbing it." It may well be that pleasure is one of the resistances of the masses and that part of the function of this pleasure is an attempt to deny the seemingly necessary relations of power that ideology would want to assume for the distribution and transferral of meaning within social structures.

There is a further point that underlies Hall's suspicion of postmodernism. This is his feeling that it is a simplistic model that evades engaging with the complexities and contradictions of a late capitalist society. By denying meaning, by denying ideology it denies the unequal distribution of power in society, the perception of which has always been an informing perspective in Hall's work. Entailed by this is the notion that meanings not only exist, but are full of the same contradictory and contesting forces as the society which produces, circulates and consumes them.

His theory of articulation precisely addresses this sense of complexity. It's a sophistication of his earlier "preferred reading" theory which insisted on the reader's ability to contest and modify meanings promoted by the dominant ideology: this contestation was socially determined so that the relationship of the reader to the text reproduced the relationship of his/her social location to the dominant ideology. The theory of articulation takes this a stage further by

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denying a monosemic view of the dominant ideology—ideology simply does not say the same things to the same people at the same time. Rather it works through cultural forms whose meanings and political effectivity are determined by how they are articulated with other forms. So when MTV is articulated with the music industry its meanings are those of advertising, and a rock video is a more or less effective commercial for the record or group it is promoting. But when it is articulated (linked) with the politics of pleasure it can articulate (speak) resistances to, and evasions of, the capitalist social machine. As MTV is articulated (linked) differently to other cultural formations of capitalism, so the capitalism inscribed in it and the effectivity of its inscription, is differently articulated (spoken). As the viewer's social relations contradict those of the producers, so his/her articulations (linkages and speech) of MTV will contradict the capitalist ideology.

But Hall is careful to argue that an oppositional articulation of a cultural form has no necessary connection with radical politics. A change in cultural form (e.g., MTV) or a change in social forces (e.g., Rastafarianism) need not produce changes in the political system because their cultural domains are not necessarily articulated with that of politics. A rock subculture or a black subculture may not find direct political action necessary to their subcultural experience. But, on the other hand, they may: political action is always possible, though never necessary.

It is by discursive practices such as the politics of reading that social differences are kept alive and well, and through which they are able to exert constant resistances (however varied in degree and kind) to the equally constant attempts of the dominant to make their social power as effective as possible. And this points to a profound difference between Hall and Baudrillard, for Hall *respects* those social groups that Baudrillard lumps dismissively under the term "the masses." Hall respects the cultural resistance of the powerless and subordinate: despite more than a century of economic, political and ideological domination, they are still active and kicking: they still make it difficult for hegemony to work, they still maintain an uncomfortable and unaccommodating variety of social identities despite the powerful political and economic attempts to homogenise them.

For Hall, they are not a passive, silent mass. Their power to contest meanings enables them to find cultural formations through which they can speak and circulate their meanings. Hall's account of Rasatafarian culture is a clear example of articulation in both senses of the word. Incidentally, Chambers (forthcoming) shows how the Rastas in Britain have now re-articulated themselves more closely to western metropolitan culture than to black Jamaican, and are beginning to appear in Italian tracksuits and other articulations of contemporary popular urbanity. This ability of the subordinate to rearticulate themselves as their material conditions change and as their meanings of those conditions change is evidence of the vitality and resilience that Hall respects so deeply.

But this ability to articulate a subcultural identity exists only within and against hegemonic forces. Hall recognizes clearly that discursive resources are as inequitably distributed as economic resources, and that the subordinate are limited to devalued and disempowered discursive formations—they rarely speak in literature, in film, on television. But they do speak, they do make their own meanings, their own identities.

And the role of ideology in this is central. What Hall calls an "organic ideology," that is one arising from the shared material conditions of various groups of people, can act to unify those groups and construct for them something approaching a class identity, a class consciousness. This organic ideology unifies

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by providing forms of intelligibility which explain the collective situation of different social groups: an organic ideology, then, empowers the subordinate. Feminism is a clear and potent example of an organic ideology working to unify and empower. (Incidentally, the comparative unacknowledgement of feminism in Hall's work is both surprising and unfortunate.) The notion of an ideology empowering the subordinate rather than the dominant may seem, on the face of it, a surprising one but it is a vital part of Hall's respect for the subordinate, for their power to resist the dominant, and to maintain awkward social contradictions.

Hall constantly emphasizes the contradictions in society, the contradictions in meanings, the contradictions in ideologies and the contradictions in subjectivities; and those pervasive, structural contradictions are both the seeds and the fruit of resistance. But all these contradictory, competing cultural forces are not a sort of free floating liberal pluralism, nor do they exist merely at the postmodern level of fragmented signifiers, but they are deeply inscribed in the material conditions of existence in capitalist societies and in the power relations that structure those conditions. Meanings underpin or undermine any given social order, but they cannot exist independent of it. The people are neither cultural dupes nor silenced victims, but are vital, resilient, varied, contradictory, and, as a source of constant contestations of dominance, are a vital social resource, the only one that can fuel social change. The politics of Hall's work is to recover, understand and legitimate these popular forces and in so doing to redefine and revalidate the social role of the intellectual. We'll drink to that any night of the semester.

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